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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study explored how small groups of student readers interacted in a classroom over time to interpret short stories assigned by a teacher. For five weeks, eight sixth-grade volunteers met on consecutive Fridays in two separate face-to-face discussion groups to read, discuss, rewrite, and perform a short story as a play. Primary data were transcripts of participant talk recorded during the five meetings and during performance. Transcripts of talk were analyzed using a discourse analysis system. Results indicated that the fragmented nature of group 1's day-to-day social interactions was reflected in and reflected the fragmented nature of the interpretive texts created by group 1 participants, while the cohesive nature of group 2's day-to-day social interactions was reflected in and reflected the coherence in the interpretive texts created by group 2 participants. Findings make visible the relationship between the academic and social nature of classroom talk accomplishment as task groups made meaning using texts of narrative fiction. Findings also suggest a need to expand literary response theory and to develop research perspectives that can account for the social aspects of reader response when reading takes place in group situations and the social aspect becomes dominant. (Contains 12 references and two tables of data. An appendix of data, the short story, and the group performance texts are attached.) (RS)

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How Texts and Interactions Shape Performance

running head: common texts, uncommon interpretations

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COMMON TEXTS, UNCOMMON INTERPRETATIONS: HOW TEXTS AND INTERACTIONS SHAPE PERFORMANCE

The question of how children make sense of narrative fiction assigned in school has been considered and investigated by theorists and researchers during recent years in an area of inquiry known as reader response. Reader response theory focuses on how a reader makes meaning during the process of reading a literary text. In contrast to the absolute focus on text made by postwar critics, reader response critics proposed a mutable relationship between printed text and the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978; Iser, 1978; Fish, 1980).. One impact of this shift in theoretical view has been that, in pedagogical practice, the concept of one correct reading of a given literary text has given way to a concept of numerous possible readings.

Research in reader response that has emerged from this shift has investigated how single readers make meaning during the process of reading text. How multiple readers interact with texts as well as with each other during the reading process to produce meaning has received less attention (Beach, 1993). Because classroom reading often involves more than one person, investigation of reader response in the classroom calls for a research perspective that takes into account the social nature of this act (Golden, 1986; Myers, 1992). Studies in the social construction of literate practices suggest one such perspective.

Research in the social construction of literate practices is based in an assumption that reading is a process that goes beyond communicating meanings between reader and text. Reading is also used to communicate meanings and to build social relationships among the people involved in the reading event (Cochran-Smith, 1984). The view of reading as a social accomplishment (Bloome, 1987), one that occurs in and through the actions and interactions of everyday life (Green, 1990) was used to provide this study with a theoretical basis for investigating how the relationship between academic and social processes affects reader response in school.

BACKGROUND

This study explored the question of how small groups of student readers interacted in a classroom over time to interpret short stories assigned by a teacher. It was designed to focus on multiple readers in

actual classroom situations in order to consider the relationship among the social and academic elements observable during day to day classroom life. The purpose of the investigation was to describe the nature of reader response as it took place in two small, ongoing task groups in school. Study design emerged from the question, "What happens when small groups of sixth graders meet over time to read and discuss an assigned short story for the purpose of reconstructing and performing it as a play?"

METHOD

For five weeks, eight sixth grade volunteers met on consecutive Fridays in two separate face to face discussion groups to read, discuss, rewrite and perform a short story as a play. Groups met in a vacant computer lab during reading period. The eight students were sorted using 1) cohort membership and 2) gender as criteria. Two girls and two boys were assigned to each group, one group from each of two sixth grade cohorts.

An ethnographic system was used to collect data (Spradley, 1980). I remained in the classroom with the students as a participant/observer. During the first two days, I acted as teacher to frame the project. During the remaining days, I acted as observer, running the video camera to help define the change in roles. Primary data were transcripts of participant talk recorded during the five meetings and during performance. Transcripts of talk were analyzed using a discourse analysis system that shows the realization of sociocultural understanding by group participants engaged in the process of interpreting literary text (Green & Wallat, 1979, 1981).

At their first meeting, participants in Groups 1 and 2 silently read six assigned short stories. At the second meeting, they discussed and chose the story they would dramatize. Both groups chose the same story, "The Dinner Party," by Mona Gardner (Appendix B). During instruction on this day, interpretive discussion and performance were framed to include elements of student responsibility for task, the nature of text-reader relationship, and rhetorical analysis of literary text. A comparison between Group 1 and Group 2 of this framing discourse showed that all frame elements were presented to both groups in similar ways (Tables 1 and 2).

During the next three days, participants in each group took over the responsibility for producing their performances, functioning without an instructor except when they needed administrative help (such as scheduling the stage for their performance day). On the last day, participants in both groups presented their completed performance texts.

Comparative analysis of activity by phase and by time spent by the two groups over the first five days showed close pattern similarity between the two groups at this level (Appendix A). Participants in Groups 1 and 2 had been given similar task frames and had spent about the same amount of time in approximately the same kinds of activity over the five days. In this way, they experienced common story texts.

Table 1

Frame Elements, Day 1, Groups 1 and 2

Frame Elements	Social Structure	Initiator	Group 1	Group 2
1. Read six stories	individual	instructor	x	x
2. Choose one	group	instructor	x	x
3. Rewrite	group	instructor	x	x
4. Act out	group	instructor	x	x
5. Discuss	group	instructor	x	x
6. Take over task	group	instructor	x	x
7. Create meaning, interpret	group	instructor	x	x
8. Change story	group	instructor	x	x
9. Add character	group	instructor	x	x
10. Narrator as character	group	instructor	x	x
11. Costume decision	group	participant	x	
12. Live audience	group	instructor		x

Table 2

Frame Elements, Day 2, Groups 1 and 2

New Frame Elements	Social Structure	Initiator	Group 1	Group 2
1. Grounded interpretation	group	instructor	x	x
2. Rhetorical interpretation	group	instructor	x	x
3. Many interpretations	group	instructor	x	x
4. Interpretation is ongoing	group	instructor	x	x
5. Live audience	group	instructor	x	x, Day 1

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Performance Texts

Although participants in Group 1 and Group 2 read common story texts and were instructed to frame interpretive task in common ways, they produced two different performance texts. A comparison of performance texts for Groups 1 and 2 (Appendix B) showed that not only were the performance interpretations different in content, but that Group 2's text presented a coherent story with a logical argument and that Group 1's did not.

Group 2 dramatized its story interpretation in logical sequence, making sparing use of a stage narrator to allow the audience to follow the thinking of a key character (Beginning, Episodes 1 and 4). The rest of the story was presented in invented dialogue that coherently explained the stage action to the audience. In contrast, Group 1's interpretation began logically but in Episodes 2-5 jumped to a series of non sequiturs. M2 wondered about the cook (Episode 2). A character appeared onstage with no clear motivation (Episode 3). M1 began a counting game for no clear reason (Episode 5). By the time the narrator entered to tell the audience what was going on (Epidsode 6), the story logic had been lost.

On the level of story argument, Group 2's performance text addressed the rhetorical thread in the author's story and Group 1's did not. Group 2 invented its own dramatic version of the "Are women wimps?" argument by casting M2 as the male chauvinist arguer (Episode 1) who was brought to comeuppance not only by the revelation of the hostesses' subtle deed at the end, but also by the hostesses' unsubtle smack (Episode 2) and his own dramatized fear of the revealed snake (Episode 5).

While Group 2's performance text gave the audience a clear, unconfused message by Group 2's performance text, Group 1's text was absent of a clear argument about whether or not women are wimps. The narrator's gratuitous remark (Episode 7) was not supported by the dialogue in Episodes 8 and 9. The last line of the author's text was repeated in Group 1's performance, but the ironic impact was lost.

Analysis of Roles and Relationships

Analysis of transcripts of talk about interpretation over the five planning days showed the interactive nature of the social and academic accomplishment of the assigned interpretive task by Groups 1 and 2. In Group 1, participants constructed social roles and relationships that constrained group academic performance. In Group 2, participants constructed social roles and relationships that supported group academic performance. Group 1's social interaction was characterized by discourse that was monopolized by two people, that excluded other participants, and that left frame clashes unresolved. Group 2's social interaction was characterized by a shared discourse that functioned to resolve frame clashes quickly and without apparent consequence. The following analysis of representative transcripts of talk in each group on Day 4 illustrates these tendencies. In this analysis, M1 signifies male 1; M2 signifies male 2; F1 signifies female 1; and F2 signifies female 2 in each of the two groups.

In Group 1 on Day 4, three participants are present. M1, who has said little during the previous three meetings, is absent. I have left the room. F1 is writing performance script, a task that she has assumed throughout the meetings. F2 and M2 offer suggestions about wording. How various participant suggestions are or are not taken up by the group and incorporated into the script reflects roles and relationships that, by this time, have become normal within Group 1.

<u>Transcript, Day 4, Group 1</u>

223 F2: no this story takes place in india
224 M2: yeah
225 F1: no in so and sos palace in india
226 M2: yeah
227 M2: i dont care
228 F1: oh

229 F1: in the colonels palace

230 M2: in the colonials palace

231 F1: its not the colonial

232 F1: in india

233 F1: this story takes place in the colonials palace in india

M2 alternately agrees with both F2 and F1, and offers no suggestions of his own. His "I don't care..." and F1's "Oh" accompanied by no substantive response identifies M2 as a group member whose role is peripheral to group process.

F2 and F1, who by now have become partners in creating the group interpretation, go right on with the business of writing script. They do not stop to repair the clash indicated by M2's statement (227). M2 tries to gain participatory status in the group by correcting F1's pronunciation, a move that is rejected (229-31) and mocked (233).

F1 and F2 continue to determine how the performance script will be written (237-245), F1 as the writer and F2 as her support. At this point, M1 and M2 are not a part of this process, M1 because he is absent and M2 because he has been excluded by F1 and F2. M2 tries to reenter the conversation by making a comment about their common situation (246; this day, these participants are missing book reports in reading class.) and is once again ignored.

Transcript, Day 4, Group 1

237 F2: the colonel is having a dinner party

238 F1: is having a dinner party with his officers

239 F2: army officers

240 F1: with his army officer friends

241 F2: and their wives

242 F1: army officers

243 F1: and their wives

244 F2: and a visiting american naturalist

245 F1: army officers and their wives

246 M2: good thing we dont have to listen to all those stupid book reports

247 F1: and a visiting
248 M2: i know
249 F1: and a visiting what
250 F1: what
251 F2: a visiting american naturalist

In Group 2 on Day 4, all four participants are present. Once again , I leave the room, as I had done with Group 1. M2 has established himself as a periodic goof-off during the first four days. Other Group 2 members have tolerated this role and it has not obviously interfered with accomplishment of group task.

Transcript, Day 4: Group 2

497 M1: [M2] you can get a
498 M1: [M2]ll be the narrator and then hell say
499 M1: ahh ill bring all the food and plates
500 M1: i you can get the i get all the food and plates
502 F2: ill get this little thing like a cup like
503 M2: and say im gonna blow this goddam [inaudible] away

504 M1: ahh
505 F2: do you ever watch that on channel 7
506 F2: thats dorky

507 F2: what do you watch
508 F2: do you watch videos
509 F2: or um [inaudible]ok
510 F2: unless its um

511 M2: ok ok
512 M2: so ok
513 M2: thats it
514 M2: the country in india in india

When M2 uses language inappropriate in school that will be picked up by the video camera (503), F2 scrambles to repair (505-506), playing a bridging role that has become normal for her in this group

interaction. M1, who has established himself in a parent role in relation to M2 during group life is caught off guard (504), and F2 continues to cover (509-10) until M2 reenters the task frame (511-14). Relieved of her bridging role, F2 returns to a former role and begins to direct M2's performance. M2 will be first to speak onstage and has an idea of what he should say, an idea that F2 challenges . F1 and M1 stay out of this clash for the time being.

M2 resists F2's attempts to direct in order to make up his own lines (521-536). F2 finally acquiesces (537), the frame clash is openly resolved, and M2's right to control his speech is established (538).

Transcript. Day 4. Group 2

521 M2: in india a colonel officer and his wife had had um invited guests for a dinner party

522 M2: were having a large

523 F2: no no were having a large dinner party

524 F2: no no

525 F2: you say

526 F2: they have invited

527 M2: thats what i was saying

528 M2: im saying in india a colonel officer and his wife are having a big huge dinner party theyre having guests as an army officer an american naturalist

529 F2: no youve gotta say what they look like

530 F2: you gotta um

531 M2: i would do that later

532 F2: no you wont because

533 M2: ill go like this

534 M2: ill say as as ill go their guests are army officer

535 F2: army officer

536 M2: wait let me finish

537 F2: ok

538 M2: an army officer an american naturalist an some women in government

The hierarchy of command is shown a short time later as F2 reenters group interaction as director to get M1 and M2 moving (560). F1, who is accorded authority by the rest of the group on the rare occasions when she speaks, challenges M1 as the initiator of the argument about men and women (563). She proposes instead M2, and succeeds at writing him into Group 2's performance text as arguer. F2 supports F1 (562). In so doing, she indicates that, while she occasionally acts as director, she does so only by F1's leave. When F1 wants to take over, the floor is hers(563-564).

Transcript, Day 4, Group 2

560 F2: so are you guys going to continue the discussion

561 M1: yes

562 M1: well ill start arguing ill say

563 F1: no [M2] starts arguing

564 F2: yeh [M2]

ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC NATURES OF ASSIGNED GROUP TASK

Analysis of evidence taken from transcripts of participant talk in Groups 1 and 2, Days 1-5, shows a relationship between the social and academic natures of assigned group task. The fragmented nature of Group 1's day-to-day social interactions was reflected in and reflected the fragmented nature of the interpretive texts created by Group 1 participants. In contrast, the cohesive nature of Group 2's day-to-day social interactions was reflected in and reflected the coherence in the interpretive texts created by Group 2 participants.

In Group 1, participants had trouble constructing roles and relationships that would support task accomplishment. F1 and F2 paired to take over task. M1, who was absent on Day 4 and whose speaking was handicapped by the fact that he was in the process of having braces installed on his teeth, said little during group life. Attempts by M2 to participate in interpretive interaction with F1 and F2 was repeatedly rebuffed and finally eliminated altogether on Day 4 when F1 and F2 returned after snack break to resume interpretation while M2 went to athletics. Social interaction in Group 1 was fragmented, stiff, and

characterized by frequent frame clashes. The performance text produced by this group was also fragmented and lacked the integrated rhetorical argument presented in the performance text of Group 2.

Analysis of transcripts of day to day talk of participants in Group 2 showed evidence of an easy flow that was missing from Group 1's interaction. They laughed, resolved frame clashes without apparent incident and produced texts that consistently delivered a coherent message. Interaction in the group occurred in gendered pairs, but with a difference from similarly configured interaction seen in Group 1. In Group 2, one female participant (F2) bridged between the male pair (M1 and M2) and the female participant (F1) who was writing the script. F2 alternately laughed and chatted with M1 and M2 and reconstructed text with F1. F1 also contributed to this bridge on an academic level by integrating the comic elements suggested in the goofing-off of M1 and M2 into the finished performance text.

Study results made visible the relationship between academic and social nature of classroom task accomplishment as task groups made meaning using texts of narrative fiction. In Group 1, talk was used to construct social roles and relationships that constrained group academic accomplishment. In Group 2, talk was used to construct roles and relationships that supported group accomplishment. Moreover, the style of social patterns constructed by the spoken interaction in each group was reflected in the style of each group's performance.These results suggest a need to expand literary response theory and to develop research perspectives that can account for the social aspects of reader response when reading takes place in group situations and the social aspect becomes dominant.

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APPENDIX A

Phases of Group Activity

Phase time described in minutes, Days 1-5, Groups 1&2

Phases of Activity	Day 1		Day 2		Day 3		Day 4		Day 5	
	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2
Pre-session Social	*	*	1	1	*	*	1	1		
Getting Ready to Talk	2	1	1	1						
Talking about Task	4	3	2	1	3	2	2	3		
Getting Ready to Do Task	5	5							11	10
Doing Task	30	32	15	20	23	29	48	51	42	33
Closing	3	3	2	1	3	*	1	4	*	2
Post-session Talk			*							7
Reopening							*			
Doing Task							4			
Reclosing							*			*
Total time spent	44	44	21	24	29	31	56	59	53	52

*less than 1 minute spent

APPENDIX B

Author's Story and Group Performance Texts

Author's Story Text

The Dinner Party

by Mona Gardner

The country is India. A colonial official and his wife are giving a large dinner party. They are seated with their guests--army officers, government attaches with their wives, and a visiting American naturalist--in their spacious dining room, which has a bare marble floor, open rafters, and wide glass doors opening onto a veranda.

A spirited discussion springs up between a young girl who insists that women have outgrown the jumping-on-a-chair-at-the-sight-of-a-mouse era and a colonel who says that they haven't.

"A woman's unfailing reaction in any crisis," the colonel says, "is to scream. And while a man may feel like it, he has that ounce more of nerve control than a woman has. And that last ounce is what counts."

The American does not join in the argument but watches the other guests. As he looks, he sees a strange expression come over the face of the hostess. She is staring straight ahead, her muscles contracting slightly. With a slight gesture, she summons the native boy standing behind her chair and whispers to him. The boy's eyes widen, and he quickly leaves the room.

Of the guests, none except the American notices this or sees the boy place a bowl of milk on the veranda just outside the open doors.

The American comes to with a start. In India, milk in a bowl means only one thing--bait for a snake. He realizes there must be a cobra in the room. He looks up at the rafters--the likeliest place--but they are bare. Three corners of the room are empty, and in the fourth the servants are waiting to serve the next course. There is only one place left--under the table.

His first impulse is to jump back and warn others, but he knows the commotion would frighten the cobra into striking. He speaks quickly, the tone of his voice so arresting that it sobers everyone.

"I want to know just what control everyone at this table has. I will count to three hundred--that's five minutes--and not one of you is to move a muscle. Those who move will forfeit fifty rupees. Ready!"

The twenty people sit like stone images while he counts. He is saying "two hundred and eighty" when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the cobra emerge and make for the bowl of milk. Screams ring out as he jumps to slam the veranda doors safely shut.

"You were right, colonel!" the host exclaims. "A man has just shown us an example of perfect control."

"Just a minute," the American says, turning to his hostess. "Mrs. Wynnes, how did you know the cobra was in the room?"

A faint smile lights up the woman's face as she replies. "Because it was crawling across my foot."

Episodic Analysis of Performance Texts, Groups 1 and 2*

Group 1, Beginning

001 F1: this story takes place in the colonels palace in india

002 F1: the colonels having a dinner party

003 F1: with his wife a young girl and a visiting american naturalist

Plot: Episode 1

004 F1: the young girl brings up the controversy about self control

005 F2: well i think that women have outgrown the jumping on the chair at the sight of a mouse era

006 M1: i think that men have one more ounce of control than women have

Episode 2

007 M2: i wonder whats taking the cook so long

008 M2: i better go check

Episode 3

009 F1: the visiting american naturalist notices the hostess strange expression

010 M1: i think that men have one more ounce and that counts

Episode 4

011 M2: [clump clump shuffle shuffle] cluck

Episode 5

012 M1: im gonna count to five hundred nobody move or they must forfeit fifty rupees

013 M1: one two three four five six seven

Complication: Episode 6

014 F1: the american notices the servant boy put the bowl of milk on the ground

015 F1: he knows that could mean only one thing

016 F1: a snake is in the room

017 M1: four hundred ninety seven four hundred ninety eight four hundred ninety nine five hundred

Resolution: Episode 7

018 F1: this man has just shown a perfect example of self control

Episode 8

019 F1: but how did you know

020 M1: i saw the expression on the hostess face when i saw the servant boy put the bowl of milk

Episode 9

021 F1: and how did you know

022 F2: it was crawling across my foot

Group 2, Beginning

001 M2: the country the countrys india

002 M2: a colonel officer and his wife are having a huge dinner party

003 M2: the guests are army officers government people and an merican naturalist

Plot: Episode 1

004 M2: a spirited discussion comes up between a young girl and an army officer

005 M2: girls cant be in the army

006 M2: i mean theres too many snakes

007 M2: girls are scared of snakes

008 F1: not any more weve outgrown that

009 M2: its true you women jump on a chair at the sight of a mouse

010 F1: youre just jealous cuz you have to be in the army

Episode 2

011 F2: i once knew a girl in the army

012 M2: i dont care shut up you wimp

013 F2: dont talk to me like that [smack]

014 M2: ahhhhgh

015 M2: ok no more of this discussion at the table

Episode 3

016 F2: jeeves fetch me a bowl of milk secretly

Complication: Episode 4

017 M2: the merican knows that a bowl of milk in ind the merican knows that a bowl of milk in india could only mean one thing

018 M2: bait for a snake

019 M2: but he looks around and cant even see the snake

020 M2: it must be under the table

020 M1: ahh what i want to know what control there is at this table

021 M1: ill count to twenty and not one of you move a muscle

022 M1: and if you do youll forfeit fifty rupees fifty dollars

023 M1: one two ten twelve furteen fifteen sixteen seventeen eighteen

Episode 5

024 M2: ahh snake omygosh help ahh no

025 M1: calm down man

Resolution: Episode 6

026 M1: how did you know there was a snake under the table

027 F2: because he was crawling across my foot

*Key: Indentation signifies dialogue between actors; all other units are narration.